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Women in Migration: Some Notes from the West Balkan Route

Gender is often overlooked, but important factor in research on migration. Women enter into migration experience as active individuals, but also encounter different difficulties than men do. Although it cannot be claimed that these differences are experienced by all women in the same way, we can conclude that they are the consequences of the gendered reality we live in. The article is discussing the gender specific experiences that female migrants encounter on their travel. It focuses on different forms of violence they are facing and on experiences of pregnant women. Furthermore, it deals with the legislation concerning refugees and tries to show how this legislation indirectly creates threats to women migrants while at the same time it is depriving them of power and victimizes them. It is based on understanding the legislature as man-centred, which means that it is mainly shaped by experiences of men while often not examining the specific experiences and needs of women. The data for the interpretations is non-structured and semi-structured interviews collected during field work in three refugee centers in Serbia. The interviews were mostly focused on experiences of women while traveling on the West Balkan route. They were further analyzed with anthropological and related literature.

Key words: Serbia, women, migration, pregnancy, refugees.

Жене у миграцији: Белешке са западно-балканске руте

Иако се то често превиђа, род је важан фактор у истраживању миграција. Жене улазе у искуство миграција као активни појединци, али се срећу са другачијим тешкоћама него мушкарци. Иако се не може тврдити да све ове тешкоће све жене доживљавају на исти начин, може се закључити да су оне последица родно структуриране реалности у којој живимо. Овај текст се бави родно специфичним искуствима које мигранткиње имају на свом путу. Фокусира се на различите облике насиља са којима се срећу и искуствима трудница. Рад се даље бави законодавством које се односи на избеглице и покушава да укаже како ово законодавство индиректно креира опасности за мигранткиње, док их, у исто време, лишава моћи и виктимизира их. Ово се заснива на виђењу законодавства као маскулиноцентричног, што значи да је већином обликовано на основу искустава мушкараца и да често не разматра посебна искуства и потребе жена. Грађа на којој се базира интерпретација добијена је из неструктурираних и полуструктурираних интервјуа сакупљених током теренских истраживања у три избегличка центра у Србији. Интервјуи су се већином концентрисали на искуство

жена и на етапу путовања западно-балканском рутом. Они су анализирани уз помоћ релевантне антрополошке и сродне литературе.

Кључне речи: Србија, жене, миграција, трудноћа, избеглице.

The article discusses the experiences women migrants have during their travel. It tries to present women as active subjects in their migration process, to avoid generalization on essential experiences that women as migrants have and to show the negative effect that victimization has on them. In the text I was interested in specific experiences women migrants encounter on their travel. I will try to interpret them with the help of the literature on gender issues and to understand what impacts they have on their lives. I especially focus on the experiences of pregnancy, forms of violence they are exposed to and the impact that legislation has on their travel. Pregnancy is vulnerable time for migrant women, especially because they are often illegalised, do not have access to adequate health care, accommodation and are exposed to difficulties on travel. Although health care is nominally available to migrants in Serbia, it can be difficult to access it in practice. Furthermore, women often encounter violence by repressive organs, smugglers and the other migrants. All forms of violence are made in circumstances that are making possible violent acts to happen. During migration repressive organs have power over migrants due to their illegalized status, smugglers have power over them because they are often the only alternative migrants have to cross the borders and men often become more violent in conflict situations like migration is. Furthermore, women are more often exposed to sexual abuses. I will try to interpret these issues as effects of the legislation that is producing these circumstances, while not making enough to protect migrant women on the way.

Introduction

Gender is still a factor that is not considered enough in research on migration. Women are often presented as passive victims or completely forgotten in academic writings and public discourses. Taking gender into account, understood as social and cultural ideas, performances and practices of femininity and masculinity, is crucial, because it is shaping our life possibilities and opportunities (Cranford and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2006, 106). Therefore, women and men do not start the process of migration in the same way, and they do encounter different obstacles, considering historical and social context (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1992, 394).

In my research, I was interested in gender specific experiences that female migrants¹ encounter on their travel. I discuss stories of female migrants and try to

¹ I use the term migrant and refugee interchangeably. None of our interlocutors was *de jure* refugee as they mostly did not get an asylum yet, but were referring to themselves as refugees as they planned on asking for refugee status. They were also using the facilities named e.g. refugee center and are commonly named refugees in popular discourse. Using the term migrant I want to emphasize the fact they are in Serbia mostly just temporarily, still migrating to the country they wanted

interpret the influence that their gender had on their travel. The research was done within the field work conducted by students of the Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology department from Ljubljana in the beginning of April 2015. We were divided into three groups, each visiting different refugee centers in Serbia – Bogovađa, Krnjača and Banja Koviljača. We used semi-structured and non-structured interviews with migrants and with some people employed in centers and the local inhabitants living close to the centers. Our interlocutors were mostly migrants which were traveling through the West Balkan migration route and were accommodated in refugee centers in Serbia. Some of them were temporarily legalized as asylum-seekers because they asked for asylum and so they had a right to be accommodated in refugee centers and some lived in so called *jungles*, which mainly meant that their status in Serbia was not legalized. After deciding about the concrete subject we intended to write upon, we were able to use data collected by other students conducting the fieldwork and analyze it. We collected the stories of seven different women which I am using for my analysis.

In the article I especially focused on the following topics: how migration experience is shaped by pregnancy, which forms of violence women experience more often, and how traveling with children influences the travel of women. I tracked the absence of understanding women as potential refugees in legislation and policies and gave some suggestions on how that influences the lives of women during migration.

The awareness of essentializations of women in feminism theories has marked the researches on gender issues in postmodernism and poststructuralism (Facchi in Cukut Krilić 2009, 32). The so called the third wave of feminism tries to take into account factors like postcolonialism, race, class, religion, sexual orientation and nationality, because of which *feminism* has split into feminisms (Stanford Friedman in Cukut Krilić 2009, 32). It is essential for the researches on migrations to be aware of big differences inside the category of “women” and consequently to avoid generalizations. The same goes for this text, for which it is important to understand that the described experiences are not typical for all female migrants and asylum-seekers. I wanted to point out some aspects of migration and gender specific experiences of women on the way and not try to establish any prototype of a female migrant.

Legislation and its impact on female migrants

Legislation is socially constructed and as such it is always a product of a specific time period and space within which it was developed. It is based on notions about a subject that is, in our context, a male individual. The feminist critics on legislature are that, although we perceive it and its legitimacy as neutral and universal, it masks particular hierarchies and distributions of power (Cook 1993, 76). Cook writes that status of women is defined by social, political, religious and other insti-

to reach. Interchangeable use of terms shows also that legal statuses of migrants can be changing during their travel (see De Genova 2002).

tutions which are mostly led by men and are therefore acting in male-gendered ways. Women are often subordinated to assume servile roles and are, with legal and other instruments, excluded from the centers of power (Cook 1995, 354), where, among others, also legislation concerning immigration is decided upon.

Legislation dealing with asylum seekers in Serbia is based on Geneva Convention with New York Protocol (Stojić Mitrović 2014a, 1114).² Historic roots of asylum policy are in the post second World War period and in the Cold war so the “prototypical asylum-seeker has been a (male) individual persecuted for his political beliefs or activities” (Calavita 2006, 11). Monica Bond writes that particular bias of immigration legislation is also due to definition of human rights that does not include the category of gender (Cukut Krilić 2009, 62). Like the definition of human rights, the asylum system is also developed within the liberal discourses that divide between public and private (Freedman 2012, 215) so the “private” persecutions are not understood as a legitimate claim for asylum (see also Calavita 2006, 11; Freedman 2012, 211; Kofman 1999, 281). The “stereotypical” way of understanding female migration is always connected to “individual, private, family reasons, while male migration would be a result of external, public, economic reasons” (Morokvašić 1984, 898).

There were some developments in granting women more possibilities to obtain asylum, such as the European Parliament and Canadian policies in the 1980s and 1990s that recognized women as “social group” who could face persecution based on gender (see Calavita 2006, 11). Nonetheless, it is still more difficult for women to get asylum either because it is more difficult to show the evidence of gender based violence (European parliament 2016, 12) or because there are still considerable differences on how the member countries of European Union threat the right to international protection based on gender related persecution (Freedman in Mozetič 2016, 159). The legislature has also specific impact on women’s lives, within which the most obvious is that less women decide to go to Europe (EUROSTAT 2015), but statistics are showing that the number of female migrants is getting higher (European parliament 2016, 8).

A less obvious product of legislation is internalization of victimization. Constant victimization to which especially female migrants are subjected mainly consists of denying strength and other personal characteristics to a human being and results in internalization of self-image as powerless human being. Shirley Ardener writes about women in process to be granted asylum as “silenced groups”. She claims that in every instance there is a mode of expression which is established by a dominant group. Whoever does not comply with this mode is not heard, or is being “silenced” (in Buijs 1993, 15). Women, therefore, need to adapt to dominant ways of expression, in the case of female migrants that is presenting her as innocent victims that are in need of protection (Ibid.). Freedman writes that conforming to the

² For an overview of how legislation concerning migration was developed in Serbia see Stojić Mitrović 2014a.

particular construction of a “real refugee” is a specific strategy that asylum seekers use during the asylum process. Women would therefore need to “conform both to an appropriate image of the “convention refugee” and to representations of proper modes of ‘female’ behaviour” (Freedman 2012, 211).

Migrant women are more often stereotyped as victims, in contrast to men that are more often stereotyped as criminals (Calavita 2006, 122). But women do not always apply to the “rules” and do not behave as victims. Migrant women with whom we spoke in Serbia showed a great sense of autonomy, strength and solidarity on their difficult travel, which is seen by stories of some of them. Here I am presenting the following one:

“Eva and Zahra became friends in refugee center. Zahra is from Syria and came to Serbia in two weeks. She decided to leave Syria because of war, after her husband, father and brother were killed. Eva is from Eritrea and is already traveling for eight years. Eva left Eritrea to Saudi Arabia because of bad economic situation in the country. She feels that as a good mother she needs to enable her children to have a good future. That is also the reason she left Saudi Arabia where she was working for six years. Eva wants to go to Norway where two of her children are. Zahra is planning to go to Sweden as her sister and second brother are there. Eva and Zahra decided they will travel together because Zahra has GPS and Eva speaks a lot of languages” (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva).

All migrants had more or less difficult experiences before arriving to Serbia. We have spoken with many migrants that were very much traumatized because of their experiences. Here is one of their stories:

“Sonja left Eritrea with her children because her husband was politically active. He was an activist for the rights of ethnical group Afar. He was receiving threats and that is why he escaped to Djibuti and Kuwait. Sonja decided to leave Eritrea after some government people came to her house and were threatening her in front of her children. They left to Ethiopia, Djibuti, than crossed Turkey to Europe. When Sonja came to refugee center she did not want to speak with anybody, she had enough of all people who left her somewhere (she was surely traumatized because of the way). (...) She told about her travel fragmented, seems like she was really traumatized because of difficulties, uncertainty and lack of human support on this travel. Now she is quite calm, she seems stable, somehow she recovered, probably temporarily so they can continue their way” (Sarah Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Sonja).

Like Sonja, they all need to overcome the traumas and fears and, sooner or later, continue their way. Imagining all the difficulties they have encountered and gone through we can therefore not think of migrants only as victims, but also as autonomous, solidary human beings, each of them different from each other.

Violence and security

Migrants can experience violence caused by different groups of people or individuals. Changing legal status and especially illegalization doesn't only mean violence of repressive apparatus, but is opening ways to violence and exploitation from the others (Juhart and Petrič 2016, 294). Violence is either perpetuated by repressive organs such as police and security guards, or exercised by smugglers or migrants. Sexual violence, directed especially towards women, is common as well.

Hitchcox made a research about increased violence in refugee centers in Hong Kong. According to her, refugees who found themselves in situations facing instability and uncertainty in daily life feel that as a threat to their identity. Feeling of identity and power loss can lead to increased violence against women (Hitchcox 1993, see also McWilliams 1998). Hitchcox writes that detention system gives rise to violence of men against women and is, paradoxically, protecting women against the violence which is producing (Hitchcox 1993, 159).

Critics of portraying smugglers as violent criminals are pointing out those smugglers are often migrants because that is the rare economy available to them (Meh 2016, 277). Stojić Mitrović writes that the same goes for Serbian citizens that are "becoming increasingly involved in trafficking, since this is perceived as 'easy money' and in some regions, one of the rare opportunities to earn anything" (2014b, 71). Smugglers are doubtlessly often violent, but the fact is that the EU policies are creating a problem with smugglers with illegalization of migrants and selectively porous borders (see Freedman 2012, 212; Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2008, 226), so they are violent in a context that is giving them power over migrants. Twenty-five year old Anni who left Somalia because of civil war and poverty has shared her experience with violent smugglers:

"They crossed Macedonia in a bigger group of people. In the group there were female and male and all of them cried along the way. The leader of the group was very impatient; he was all the time pursuing them forward. He waved with a stick and was screaming: 'fast, fast!'. If one was not moving fast enough and keep up with the group they left him behind. They were hiding in the forest from the police and they needed to be completely quiet. If they made a noise leader told them: 'I will kill you'," (Urška Nemeč 2015, conversation with Anni).

Smugglers often stole all the belongings to migrants:

"From Greece to Serbia they went with smugglers. When they arrived at their goal smugglers took out their knives and took them their backpacks, telephones, jewelry, money and glasses. Eva does not see well without glasses which was causing her a lot of troubles while walking. On the way she fell and broke her teeth. They even took Eva's shoes so she walked barefoot for five days, all the way to Belgrade. She limps, her leg hurts and one of her toes is in the bandage" (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva).

Smugglers are often seen by migrants as a threat but at the same time, as a necessity to help them with crossing the countries and borders. Although migrants might know that smugglers can be dangerous they have very little other choices.

Sexual violence is commonly experienced by women on their way (see Directorate 2016, 7; van der Zee 2016; Amnesty International 2016). On our field work we did not spend enough time to make confidential relation with women to be able to talk about it. Gloria from Cameroon told us that:

“She worked for four weeks in a shoe factory in Istanbul. The boss only paid her for one week of work; to give her the rest he demanded a sexual intercourse with her. Because she did not want that she did not get the rest of the money” (Sarah Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Gloria).

Gloria did not get the payment for her labour that was probably anyway badly payed, because she refused to have sex with her boss. There are more reports pointing out that women who stay without financial goods are forced to sexual activity (see UNHCR 2016; European parliament 2016, 14; van der Zee 2016; Amnesty International 2016).

We did not encounter many stories about violence of repressive organs as well, although it is well documented (see van der Zee 2016; Amnesty International 2016; Meh 2016: 284; No Border Serbia 2015). Eva told us her story from Greece that happened a few years ago and made her delay continuation of her travel towards northern Europe: “Eva started her travel two years ago, but for some time she returned from Greece to Saudi Arabia, because she and her son (at the time he had seventeen years) were beaten by the police in Greece. She said that “police in Greece is horrible” (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva). We have documented a few stories about violent director of refugee center in Bogovada. Sonja said that “director is shaking adults with electroshock and scaring children with it” (Sarah Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Sonja).

We documented more stories about the differences that repressive organs are making between male and female. Police are often more lenient towards women than their male counterparts:

When they came to Serbia, from Lojane in Macedonia, and police got them and arrested them. Anni said to police she wants to apply for asylum. A police officer brought her home and gave her shoes, which she is still using. He brought her to the hospital for a check (Urška Nemeč 2015, conversation with Anni). Miha, a migrant from Syria, confirmed that “some things are easier for women than for men on the way. Police is often dealing with them nicer. When they catch a man they would imprison him, while they often allow women to leave or they are imprisoned for a shorter period. The same goes for older people” (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Miha). Hitchcox, writing on her conclusions upon a research in refugee centers in Hong Kong, argues that women get more help, that their male counterparts would get, if they behave obedient and powerless (1993, 156).

Pregnancy

Pregnancy and the possibility of getting pregnant make an important difference between migration experience of women and men. According to Browner woman does not simply “get pregnant” and “give birth” unlike other biological beings. She gets pregnant “within a specific network of social relations” (Browner 2000, 774) and gives birth “within the context of explicit and variable material conditions” (Ginsburg and Rapp in Browner 2000, 773).

Possibility of pregnancy impacts women’s mobility and mobility impacts pregnancy. As Federici writes, even in middle ages women were less mobile because of pregnancy and care for children (2004, 73). Some women that we have met and spoke with decided to stay in refugee centers at least till they gave birth. Serbia is one of the rare countries in which asylum seekers enjoy the same rights for a medical help as citizens (Stojić Mitrović 2014b, 71; for other countries see Doctors of the world 2014). Pregnant women, who asked for asylum, are therefore entitled to free examinations and labour (see Centar za zaštitu i pomoć tražiocima azila), but access to doctor is in practice limited.

Lejla, 23 years old from Somalia, needed to stop her travel and separated from her husband after she got pregnant:

“Lejla is in Krnjača refugee center for five months already. She started her travel with her husband Mohamed. They flew from Somalia to Turkey than went with train to Greece. In Greece Lejla got pregnant, which was the reason they decided to separate. After crossing the border with Macedonia, both went their own ways. Mohamed went further towards their goal, Norway, and by now he already succeeded in reaching it. Lejla passed Macedonia walking. When she arrived to Belgrade she was immediately accepted to refugee center Krnjača. At the time she was already pregnant for six months. Her husband is now waiting to get asylum and passport and later he will return and take Lejla and their child with him to Norway” (Sindi Časar 2015, conversation with Lejla).

Refugee centers are often not suitable for pregnant women because the access to a doctor is often difficult. Centers outside Belgrade are far away from hospitals and there was a problem even in center Krnjača that is located in Belgrade, as one of our interlocutor stated:

“In ninth month Lejla got travail in the middle of the night. They were locked inside the house and two men tried to help her with breaking down the bars on the window. One of them managed to get outside and brought security guard who called the ambulance. They brought Lejla to hospital in Belgrade and one of the migrants came with them to translate as Lejla does not speak English” (Sindi Časar 2015, conversation with Lejla).

Although health care is nominally available to pregnant migrants, in practice they face a lot of problems getting it. Lack of health care, inappropriate condi-

tions and uncertain, often changing situations, do have an impact on pregnant women's health. Mladowsky wrote about "healthy migrant effect" (2007, 9), that is, a phenomenon which states that immigrants are often healthier than citizens, when they come to a certain country. Nonetheless that phenomenon does not apply to pregnant women, which are generally in worse health conditions. Eva had an abortion shortly after she arrived to refugee center Krnjača:

"Eva said she aborted twins after being pregnant with them for four months. It was difficult, she said. She comforts herself saying that she can get pregnant again and that maybe it is better that way. Her friend says that traveling in high pregnancy is dangerous, not only for a child but for her as well. Even after birth her children could die because of exertions on the way" (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva).

The literature about immigrant women's health shows that they abort, give premature birth and need Caesarean section more often while delivery among them is higher and they have more birth-related psychological problems (see Calavita 2005; IOM 2009; Zincone 2000). This information come as no surprise given that immigrant women have more restricted access to health care, are less informed about their possible rights to health care and can be afraid of interaction with all sorts of officials.

Autonomy of female migrants and solidarity

Most women whom we talked to showed a great sense of autonomy, solidarity and persistence among their long travels. Some of them were traveling for years, changing places, and goals and lived their life through travel. As Papadopoulos and Tsianos write, the process that marks migration is de-identification. It is not only "shifting identitarian ascriptions; it is a material and an embodied way of being" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2008, 226). It is:

"A voluntary 'de-humanization' in the sense that it breaks the relation between your name and your body. A body without a name is a non-human human being; an animal which runs. It is non-human because it deliberately abandons the humanist regime of rights. The UNHCR convention for asylum seekers protects the rights of migrants on arrival, but not when they are on the road. And as we already know, the arrival has a *longue duree*: it does not concern the moment of arrival but the whole trip; perhaps a whole life" (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2008, 226).

Sarah Lunaček Brumen pointed out that some migrants due to their long travels "are actually nomads" (Sarah Lunaček Brumen, notes from fieldwork 2015). Jana, for example, is traveling for thirteen years and got a daughter while traveling:

"Jana left from Eritrea when she was seventeen, because her father was killed. Her mother died even before. She is already traveling for

thirteen years. She was in Syria and in Turkey, in Greece she gave birth to a daughter, which has five years now. Her daughter went to kindergarten in Greece, but then they left Greece together because her daughter could not get documents there” (Sarah Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Jana).

“Eva is traveling for two years. First they tried to come to Europe from Morocco, but could not cross the sea, so they went to Turkey, then Greece. They returned to Saudi Arabia after they were caught and beaten by Greek police. They started again in November, last year” (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva).

Women that we met often traveled with children. Solidarity between migrants traveling together can be seen in a story of a couple that took care of someone else’s child:

“The mother was traveling with her daughter together with the other migrants. Among them there was a couple from the same country that sometimes helped with carrying a daughter. A group fell apart after police came and mother was too tired to continue the way so mother and daughter separated. The daughter continued the travel with a couple from the same country till the center of Bogovađa. The mother came after her after a month and daughter was waiting for her in a protection of a couple. ‘You cannot imagine how happy a girl was when she saw her mother’,” (Sara Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Eritrean women that was a witness to a meeting of a daughter and mother and women from a couple that was taking care of a girl).

The couple stopped their travel and saved the little girl after the circumstances torn them apart. Traveling with children makes the way more tiring and migrants need to be persistent to keep going:

“Sonja is traveling with three children. The worst experience for her was Macedonia. They needed to walk a lot there, also 25 hours without much of a rest. Her legs hurt. Sometimes they were taken by taxis, but thrown out in the middle of nothing, saying that the police are coming. She said they were dealing with them like with dogs. They were walking along the railway line, when the train came it did not make any sound. Someone saved her with pushing her down the railway. She fell on the rocks. When they needed to cross the border two smugglers left them somewhere. Sonja started to call the police; she wanted to go back as she did not want to stay there in the middle of the night with children” (Sarah Lunaček Brumen 2015, conversation with Sonja).

An inventive way of women specific strategies to cross a border without being caught by police told us Eva and Zahra:

“When they will go to try cross the border they will take only bags with them and leave all the other possessions in refugee center. In that way there is less possibility that the police would stop them, because

they will look less suspicious, especially because Zahra has brighter complexion. A lady from Somalia will put them make up on; she is known to be good at that. Everybody will be dressed nicely” (Tina Ivnik 2015, conversation with Eva and Zahra).

With dressing up women try to hide they are migrants crossing the border illegally. Eva points out also the importance of a complexion. Because Zahra has brighter complexion it is safer to go with her than with some other women with darker skin. Crossing the border is dangerous and is sometimes an act subjected to long preparations that are somehow collective because they are so common among the migrants.

Conclusion

In the article I tried to present a part of the stories that female migrant during our field work in Serbian refugee centers have told us. Through the analysis I tried to present and explain an often overlooked side of migrations – the gender-specific experiences that women have. The stories of female migrants are often overshadowed by the experiences of men that are in academic or journalistic writing. Apart from that, female migrants are often presented as passive victims instead of recognized for their active role in migration process. Among the migrants, the number of female is indeed lower than male, but it seems the lack of taking into account women is the consequence of the fact that our perception of the world is mostly constructed by experiences of men.

I was tracing the lack of treating female migrants and asylum-seekers in legislations and politics and tried to point out their consequences. Special treatment of women is necessary due to the specific experiences such as pregnancy, sexual and other types of violence that they have during travel. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that women are actively involved in migration, and although being potential victims on the way they need to be strong and persistent to cross this difficult and dangerous way.

Women, though, are not a homogenous group so there is no such thing as “female migration experience”. Nevertheless the difference between male and female experience of migration comes from awareness that women have different ascribed roles in the society as male does (Cook, 1995, 353). It is important to realize the specifics that female migrants have lived through so that we can fill the picture which is, without female, remaining incomplete.

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